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SUBJECT: SWISS AMBASSADOR TO IRAN COMMENTS ON ASSISTING
U.S. CITIZENS AND DEALING WITH POST-ELECTION TEHRAN

REF: STATE 88826

Classified By: Ambassador Donald S. Beyer; reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Ambassador Leu emphasized that Switzerland, in its capacity as Protecting Power for the USG in Iran, continues to press for access and information about U.S. citizens detained or missing in Iran. Regarding the recent case of the three U.S. hikers (Shane Bauer, Joshua Fattal, and Sarah Shourd), Leu noted that the Iranian MFA had provided conflicting information. She underlined that she nevertheless is pressing for access to the three U.S. citizen hikers, and expects to meet with Iranian MFA Deputy Minister for American Affairs, Alireza Salari, next week to pursue the matter further. Ambassador Beyer commended Leu for her efforts, and thanked her for SPP's continued engagement on behalf of U.S. citizens in Iran.

¶2. (S) Summary continued: Leu said the situation in Tehran currently is quite confused, as re-elected Iranian president Ahmadinejad works to form his new administration amidst the fallout of the post-election demonstrations. She said that the elections and their aftermath had resulted in political fissures in Iranian society that were vertical, running from elites to the street, forming various factions competing for power. Terming the P5 1 proposal for talks with Iran "very important," Leu said that the P5 1 process nevertheless could not serve as a substitute for direct U.S.-Iranian talks, which she maintained would be essential to successfully resolving the nuclear problem with Iran. In that context, she reiterated that the Iranian government had told the Swiss government that Iran would be interested in re-establishing direct flights between Iran and the United States. Leu said that she feared that opportunities could be missed for solving problems with Iran, due to the fallout from the Iranian elections. As objectionable as the rhetoric and policies of Ahmadinejad can be, Leu said that she still believes that it is possible to deal with him. End Summary.

¶3. (SBU) Swiss Ambassador to Iran, Livia Leu, met August 31 with Ambassador Beyer in Bern to provide an update on Swiss efforts to gain access to and information about U.S. citizens detained or missing in Iran. Leu also used the opportunity to convey her views regarding dealing with the Iranian government following the June 12 Iranian national elections and their aftermath. Leu is in Switzerland for summer leave and to participate in the annual Swiss Chiefs of Mission conference. She returns to Iran September 3.

SWISS PRESSING FOR ACCESS/INFO IN U.S. CITIZEN CASES

14. (U) Ambassador Leu emphasized that Switzerland, in its capacity as Protecting Power for the USG in Iran, continues to press for access and information about U.S. citizens detained or missing in Iran. The current cases include the three U.S. citizens reportedly detained by Iran while hiking in the vicinity of the Iraq-Iran border, U.S. scholar Kian Tajbakhsh, and Robert Levinson.

15. (C) Regarding the recent case of the three U.S. hikers (Shane Bauer, Joshua Fattal, and Sarah Shourd), Leu noted that the Iranian MFA had provided conflicting information. (Note: After Iranian MFA Deputy Minister for European Affairs, Mehdi Safari, confirmed to Leu on August 11 that Iran had detained the three U.S. citizens, Iranian MFA officials subsequently denied the confirmation. End Note) She attributed this to the fact that the new Ahmedinejad administration has not yet formed, and that the responsible ministries therefore are in a period of bureaucratic uncertainty and confusion. Leu assessed that, until it is clear who will be in charge of which ministries, and which senior officials will remain in place, Iranian government contacts are being very cautious. She underlined that she nevertheless is pressing for access to the three U.S. citizen hikers, and expects to meet with Iranian MFA Deputy Minister for American Affairs, Alireza Salari, next week to pursue the matter further.

16. (C) Leu commented that the Iraq-Iran border seemed like a strange place for U.S. citizens to be on a hiking tour. She added that the apparently Jewish identity of one or more of the three hikers also probably would prompt increased suspicion of Iranian security services. More broadly, she surmised that the Iranians are taking a "tit-for-tat" approach to the cases, still upset about the 2007 arrest and detention of Iranian "diplomats" by U.S. forces in Irbil, Iraq. (Note: The Iranian personnel detained in Irbil were returned to Iran by Iraqi authorities on July 12, 2009. End Note)

17. (C) Leu also referred to Iranian complaints about alleged lack of access to Iranian citizens arrested in the United States. DCM emphasized that there was no equivalency whatsoever between the detention of the Iranian personnel in Irbil and the U.S. hikers, who by all accounts appeared to be simply adventuresome world travelers, though apparently underestimating the risk. Consul informed Leu that the USG last week (while Leu was on leave in Switzerland) had passed the Swiss Protecting Power (SPP) a message for the Iranian authorities (reftel), confirming that the USG respects its obligations to provide consular access to arrested Iranian citizens in the United States. That message further noted that the USG is not currently aware of any cases in which access has been requested and denied, and invited the GoI, via its Pakistani Protecting Power in Washington, to bring any problematic cases to the attention of the USG.

18. (C) Regarding Kian Tajbakhsh, Leu remarked that providing assistance is difficult, because the Iranian government does not recognize dual-nationality, and views Tajbakhsh strictly as an Iranian citizen. She emphasized that the SPP nevertheless continues to press for access and to provide assistance to Tajbakhsh, just as it always has done in the cases of U.S.-Iranian dual nationals, such as the case of Roxana Saberi. Leu remarked that the Iranian government views U.S. Congressional appropriations for the promotion of democracy in Iran as aimed at undermining the government, and is very suspicious of who is getting the funding in Iran and how the funds are being used. Leu had no updates to provide in the case of Robert Levinson. DCM underlined that the SPP's constant pressing of Iranian officials in detained/missing U.S. citizen cases, even if access is never granted, reduces the likelihood of mistreatment of the detained U.S. citizens. Ambassador Beyer commended Leu for

her efforts, and thanked her for SPP's continued engagement on behalf of U.S. citizens in Iran.

DEALING WITH POST-ELECTION TEHRAN

¶9. (S) Leu said the situation in Tehran currently is quite confused, as re-elected Iranian president Ahmadinejad works to form his new administration amidst the fallout of the post-election demonstrations. She assessed that the Iranian government was attempting to make some concessions to the demonstrators with certain measures, such as the closing of a detention center that had come under public scrutiny and the nomination of three women to serve as ministers in the next cabinet.

¶10. (S) Leu said that the demonstrators had shown unprecedented courage in their actions in June and July, but now appeared for the most part to be intimidated by the Iranian security forces and were lying low. She said that the elections and their aftermath had resulted in political fissures in Iranian society that were vertical, running from elites to the street, forming various factions competing for power. Leu observed that there also are some generational factors in play. The older Iranian generation that experienced Iran's revolution that deposed the Shah generally has no desire to live through the upheaval of another revolution, regardless of their political views. At the same time, the younger Iranian generation remains one of the most pro-American groups in the Middle East, and remains hopeful for change.

¶11. (S) Terming the P5 1 proposal for talks with Iran "very important," Leu said that the P5 1 process nevertheless could not serve as a substitute for direct U.S.-Iranian talks,

which she maintained would be essential to successfully resolving the nuclear problem with Iran. She said that, while sanctions had hurt Iran (particularly in the financial sector), the Iranian government continued to find ways to adapt, and still enjoys strong commercial relations with China and Russia. Per Leu, the ongoing sanctions in some ways serve to strengthen the current Iranian regime, as they reinforce the image of foreign adversaries. In Leu's view, the Iranian government will never bend to external pressure, and thus dialogue is the only way to achieve success.

¶12. (S) In that context, she reiterated that the Iranian government had told the Swiss government that Iran would be interested in re-establishing direct flights between Iran and the United States. Leu noted that she had raised this previously with USG interlocutors, and that the Iranian Vice Transportation Minister (and Iran Air Chairman) had told her several months ago that Iran remains interested. The Vice Minister had suggested that perhaps the Swiss government could facilitate U.S.-Iran talks on this topic in Switzerland. Leu noted that the flight issue presumably would include questions related to U.S. sanctions on Iran that affect the availability of aircraft parts. She added that, in her view, a discrete bilateral issue such as direct flights could lend itself to building confidence and preparing the ground for discussing other issues.

¶13. (S) In concluding her comments, Leu said that she feared that opportunities could be missed for solving problems with Iran, due to the fallout from the Iranian elections. As objectionable as the rhetoric and policies of Ahmadinejad can be, Leu said that she still believes that it is possible to deal with him. Calling him a political "daredevil" who is looking for ways to assuage domestic criticism and mark his place in history, Leu said she thinks Ahmadinejad is more open to engagement with the West than Khamenei is. She stressed that she increasingly has become convinced during her time in Iran that it does not make sense to try to begin engagement with the Iranian government at the top -- i.e., with Supreme Leader Khamenei. While Khamenei's consent for engagement with the West/USG ultimately would be needed --

and is not currently given -- he listens and responds to the various competing power centers below him, which is where the West/USG should begin its engagement, in Leu's view.

¶14. (SBU) Leu said that no dates have been set, but that she hopes to travel to Washington for meetings with USG counterparts in late October or early November.
BEYER